

Language-related misunderstanding at work: What it is, why it occurs and what organizations can do about it

January 3 2024, by John Fiset and Devasheesh Bhave



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Language is the [foundation of human interaction](#). It plays a central role in facilitating effective communication by allowing people to express

their thoughts, share essential information and establish connections with one another.

In the workplace, [linguistic diversity](#) can be beneficial for organizations by [improving customer service](#) and increasing its geographical reach.

However, despite [language](#)'s ability to foster meaningful connections, it can also exacerbate divisions between people. When language falls short of its ability to facilitate communication, it can lead to misinterpretation and a sense of disconnection or exclusion.

Various factors have given rise to an increasingly complex linguistic environment in Canadian workplaces, including [demographic shifts](#), the proliferation of occupations requiring [licensing or certification](#) that come with their own forms of [specialized language](#), and the [rapid emergence of Gen Z slang](#), among others.

Language in the workplace

In the workplace, people communicate using both [standard languages](#) (like English or French) and [hybrid languages](#) (such as jargon or slang). Both types of language can lead to misunderstanding.

While some people at work may intentionally use standard or hybrid language to hide information (e.g., lying) or exclude others (e.g., discrimination), our focus is on [language-related misunderstanding](#). This type of misunderstanding occurs when recipients unintentionally misinterpret a message due to the way it is verbally communicated.

A recent [survey of more than 1,000 Canadians](#) examined the prevalence of corporate jargon in organizations. The majority of survey participants (88%) said they used corporate jargon in the workplace about six times per day on average. Of these respondents, 35% said workplace jargon

made them feel confused, excluded or disengaged.

Similarly, [a Duolingo and LinkedIn survey](#) of employees in eight countries found that 40% of respondents experienced language-related misunderstanding because of workplace jargon.

Misunderstanding is widespread

In light of these workplace trends, we conducted a [systematic review of 122 papers from various disciplines](#), including management, psychology and communications, to examine the consequences of language-related misunderstanding in the workplace.

Our results found that language-related misunderstanding—from the use of both standard and hybrid languages—are common and can negatively affect employees' [job performance](#), [reduce their commitment to work](#) and [weaken trust between team members](#).

We identified three distinct pathways through which language-related misunderstanding can influence employees' work outcomes. These pathways can either operate independently or together.

The first is relational, highlighting interpersonal conflicts and tensions that are associated with language-related misunderstanding. The second is affective, emphasizing the intense negative emotions associated with misunderstanding. The final is informational, highlighting the loss of information that can result from language-related misunderstanding.

Managing language dynamics at work

There are several ways of preventing language-related misunderstanding in the workplace.

1. Develop a language management strategy: [Organizations should create a strategy](#) that recognizes the importance of both standard and hybrid language skills for organizational performance.

After identifying relevant competencies, resources can be allocated to address any gaps. This could involve [providing translation resources](#), such as translation software, to enhance effective communication and minimize misunderstanding.

In situations where corporate jargon, acronyms and specialized terms are necessary, organizations can provide explicit definitions and easy access to all members through a centralized location, like a corporate intranet.

2. Lead efforts to bridge language gaps: [Leaders play a crucial role in improving communication](#) within their teams. They can promote [situational awareness](#) by encouraging employees to consider the language capabilities of their colleagues and ensuring [team members](#) use language that everyone understands.

Leaders can enhance comprehension by developing processes that promote [communication redundancy](#). For instance, leaders could ask employees to use multiple communication channels (e.g., email and in-person meetings) when conveying important information in case one channel proves ineffective.

Fostering a culture where team members feel comfortable asking questions and seeking clarifications without fear of reprisal is also essential.

3. Be proactive in ensuring mutual understanding: Employees can help reduce the possibility of language-related misunderstanding by [expressing their ideas in plain language](#), avoiding jargon and opting for short, familiar words.

Organizations can support these behaviors by offering training programs geared towards [developing employees' interpersonal and language competencies](#). For instance, these [training programs](#) could focus on boosting employees' empathy, perspective-taking skills and language processing fluency.

Managing language dynamics in the workplace requires a careful, thoughtful approach. While linguistic diversity can be beneficial, organizations must recognize the potential for [misunderstanding](#) due to language differences.

Creating a [workplace](#) culture that prioritizes transparent and inclusive communication practices is crucial for fully harnessing the benefits of linguistic diversity.

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